Paint Your Smile & Hide Your Face

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at https://archiveofourown.org/works/62252059.

Rating:
Teen And Up Audiences

Archive Warning:
Graphic Depictions Of Violence

Category:
Gen

Fandom:
Masters of the Air (TV 2024)

Relationships:
Gale "Buck" Cleven & John Clarence "Bucky" Egan, Gale "Buck Cleven & John D. Brady

Characters:
Gale "Buck" Cleven, John Clarence "Bucky" Egan, John D. Brady, Langsmier (OC)

Additional Tags:
Stalag Luft III (Masters of the Air), Gale "Buck" Cleven Whump, Hurt Gale "Buck" Cleven, Protective John Clarence "Bucky" Egan, Threats of Rape/Non-Con, Threats of Violence, Abuse of Power, Hurt/Comfort, Emotional Hurt/Comfort, Angst, Introvert Gale "Buck" Cleven, Gale "Buck" Cleven Needs a Hug, Buck is slowly losing it, Suicidal Thoughts, Implied/Referenced Child Abuse

Language:
English

Series:
Part 2 of Welcome to the Masquerade

Stats:
Published: 2025-01-15 Completed: 2025-03-01 Words: 11,556 Chapters: 3/3

Paint Your Smile & Hide Your Face

by Trekkiehood

Summary

"You are pretty." Langsmier muttered, his eyes scanning Gale's frame. "It is shame you are American."

A hand came up, under Gale's jaw, placing a bruising pressure on his throat and lifting his chin. He didn't even breathe, remaining completely motionless like prey caught in a trap. Langsmier gently traced the faded shrapnel scar on his cheek with his pinky.

"You would make a good German." His nail slid across the prisoner's face, leaving a thin scratch. "Even your scars are pretty."

As life in the Stalag begins to wear Gale down, another run in with a guard may cause the final unraveling of his sanity.

Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

> "So welcome to the masquerade
> We're all trying to fool each other that we're all okay
> Dancing with the devil 'round the truth
> Paint your smile and hide your face
> Keep it prim and proper, there's no stopping this charade
> Chant the words like you're supposed to do
> I'm fine, how are you?"
> - Masquerade by Abe Parker
>
> Welcome back! I really didn't plan on posting this until I was completely finished HOWEVER I have run out of dopamine and I need a reason to finish writing. An audience tends to that for me lol.
>
> This one is a direct sequel to "I Wore My Mask Up High" and is a bit more intense. It's not graphic it's just... Intense.
>
> General apology for my shoddy German supplimented by Google translate lol
>
> Mind the tags and I'll ramble more in the end notes

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The library was quiet, most of the men having left for dinner hours ago. Gale looked at his watch, sighing at the realization that it was nearly curfew. This was one of the only times he was able to get some of the privacy he so desperately craved. If forced to choose between a meal that wouldn’t satisfy and a few moment to himself, the winner was easy.

His mood was low anyway. The weather was playing tricks on them and forcing everyone into a somber state. Things had been getting warmer, coats unnecessary, sunlight present. And then two days ago, an April snow. It wasn’t any colder than it had been in January, in fact, it was probably warmer to some extent. But it felt colder. It felt darker. But maybe it was a numbness coming from within. Not that he could ever admit that. He was the strong one. He was the one that kept everyone else going. Major Cleven didn’t get to give in to melancholy.

The Agatha Christie novel he had been reading was slipped back on the shelf. He'd read most of the books available to them, but would gladly accept any semblance of escape. He might even be able to convince himself that the murderer would be different this time... That maybe the outcome would stray. But he'd lived the same monotonous routine for long enough to know that things never changed, and if by some miracle they did, it was rarely for the better.

Checking his watch he saw that he had just under five minutes to make it back to his room. It wouldn't take nearly that long, but there was no reason to risk it. Though it was tempting to time it so that he would walk in at the chime of the bell. But it wasn't worth worrying his men.

At the door he considered how much effort he wanted to put into the short walk. If he was honest, he didn't want to put any effort into anything. But he also wasn't fond of letting in the bone chilling ache of cold that never left once it grasped a hold on the human body. So he pulled his coat closed but let his scarf hang loosely around his neck.

Quiet surrounded him as he stepped into the snow. It was a slick, murky snow. At least under foot. But at the same time, the empty yard seemed almost peaceful. Gale found himself wishing he could sit out in the center of the rare patches of untrodden snow and listen to the silence. Forget where he was and pretend he was in Wyoming, leaving campus for the Christmas holiday.

"Halt." Gale's body stopped on command. He'd never been the best at obeying orders, always one to twist and bend them to his advantage. But since bailing out over Germany he'd found that obeying orders could be a deciding factor between life and death. Obedience was survival.

"What are you doing out, Major?" He hadn't recognized the voice at first, it blended in with any of the other guards. But now he heard it. The guard, Langsmier. The one who had threatened him only a few weeks back. Attempted to humiliate him and use him as an example.

The Colonel had not been thrilled with the events and had taken them to the Commandant. As a result, Langsmier had been around less, likely moved away from yard rotations until tensions died down. It had made avoiding him easier.

"Heading to my barrack." Gale kept his voice calm, non-

confrontational, honest.

The German sergeant circled him, bringing them face to face. “Is it not curfew?”

“I still have a few minutes.” Minutes that were ticking by. He resisted the urge to check his watch.

A backhand came swift and unexpected. It knocked him off balance. The snow didn’t offer much cushion for the fall, but managed to find its way into his sleeves and down his shirt.

He pushed himself up, ignoring the cold that was seeping into his bones. Ignoring the way his heart wanted to beat out of his chest. The silence was a startling reminder that there were no witnesses this time. No Colonel to come charging in to save him. No Bucky.

Hands gripped the lapels of his coat, yanking him to his feet. The violence of the motion caused him to struggle to find his grounding in the snow. The hands remained even after Gale had found his balance. He could smell the alcohol on the guard’s breath. He wasn’t on rotation. He had been seeking out Gale deliberately. “You think you can humiliate me?” The words were low, threatening. They confirmed that this was not a chance meeting. “As long as you are here, I own you.”

He didn’t respond. Didn’t move. Didn’t breathe. He simply waited to see what would happen next.

With a sound of disgust the guard released him, taking a step back so he could look over his prey.

Buck thought about running. Thought about taking his chances and seeing if he could make it to the barracks before he was shot.

He thought about running straight for the fence and letting the guards do their job and take him out.

But the sound of a rifle would cause the men to rush out. Bucky would come out. And they would see it. Would see his blood pouring out into the snow. And Bucky would lose it. Follow him right into death.

He couldn’t let that happen.

His own life was expendable. His men’s were not. Bucky’s was not.

“You are pretty.” Langsmier muttered, his eyes scanning Gale’s frame. “It is shame you are American.”

A hand came up, under Gale’s jaw, placing a bruising pressure on his throat and lifting his chin. He didn’t even breathe, remaining completely motionless like prey caught in a trap. Langsmier gently traced the faded shrapnel scar on his cheek with his pinky.

“You would make a good German.” His nail slid across the prisoner’s face, leaving a thin scratch. “Even your scars are pretty.”

A tone sounded and the guards smile widened, his eyes shining like a boy on Christmas morning. He released Gale, his breath returning to him but working to keep his trembling body motionless. “Now you are late.” He tisked, circling the motionless prisoner as he stood defenseless in the snow. “Naughty major. You must be punished now, Ja?”

This time Gale could sense the back hand coming. It stung but he was able to keep his balance. Along with the sting he could taste blood where his lip had broken open. He reached up to wipe it away but instead found his wrist in a tight grip. Langsmier yanked him forward until Gale’s arm was the only thing between them.

“Where is your little shadow? I am surprised he has not come to save you yet. Perhaps we should ask if he wants to join us, ja?”

Suddenly any desire Gale had for Bucky to be there and save him was erased with a sick feeling. He didn’t want him anywhere near here. Bucky wouldn’t be able to handle it. He’d take a swing. He’d fight back. He’d get killed.

Gale couldn’t risk that. He couldn’t watch his best friend die. And John couldn’t watch Gale get hurt. It was a natural law. Mass can neither be created nor destroyed and John Egan couldn’t handle Buck being hurt.

The bones in his wrist felt like they were being ground to powder. He was distantly thankful that this was not his already injured wrist. But maybe that would have been better? One useless arm instead of two minorly useless? But this time it was just pressure. This would only bruise. Probably.

“There is no one here to save you.” The voice was low. Slow. Deliberate. “You will lose the war. Then there will be no Red Cross or rules of war to protect you.”

Gale felt his jaw tighten. There was nothing he could say. Nothing he could do.

“You are mine.”

There was no one around. Not a single witness.The guard could shoot him where he stood with no repercussions.

It was past curfew. A story could easily be spun for why he was dead.

He ran. He resisted. He started it.

Would there be a riot?

Would Brady be able to hold Bucky back?

Or this could continue. Langsmier throwing punches and Gale taking it until he finally broke. Whether it be now or later.

But he wasn’t allowed to break. He wasn’t allowed to show weakness. If he did, they won. They weren’t allowed to win.

Still not releasing his wrist, Langsmier used his other hand once again laid hold on Buck’s chin. Gale felt sick. He didn’t like being touched. Only Bucky had that right and that had taken time and earned trust.

He almost wished that the guard would strike him again. This gentleness was somehow worse than any hit he’d taken.

His head was maneuvered, up then down, left then right. “I must decide what I want to do with you. What die Strafe… punishment must be.”

Stillness had become his default. If he didn’t move, didn’t breathe he wouldn’t anger him further.

This was why it was better that he was targeted than one of his men. Than Bucky.

Gale knew how to not fight back.

He hated it.

But he knew how.

He’d been raised on it after all.

Bucky didn't know how to be still. He couldn't sit and enjoy the snow. He couldn't take a punch and not hit back.

Bucky wouldn't survive here without Gale to run interference.

A thumb rubbing his wrist brought his attention back to himself.

He felt the way the guard was looking him over. He could sense what he was thinking. Gale's body tensed against his will, clenching his jaw to keep himself from saying or doing something he would later regret.

The lewd grin confirmed the guards' thoughts.

Langsmier's hot breath made his face feel sticky and unclean. The bruising hold on his wrist beginning to ache. The cold that seemed to penetrate the very essence of his soul only growing darker with his next words. "Perhaps I could take you back to my quarters, ja? Give you your punishment there."

If Buck kicked him and ran, how long would it take for another guard to find him? Or he could make it easier for everyone and run straight at the fence. Let them shoot him down with some dignity left.

But Bucky-

"Was ist das?" The German captain seemed to appear out of nowhere.

The sudden release felt even more violent than the original hold. Gale stumbled, falling on his backside, finding himself frozen in more ways than one.

Not now. He couldn't fall apart now.

In the moment, in the best of everything he could hold it together. But he could feel the panic closing in around him. Langsmier's words bouncing around in his head, their meaning clear even as his brain tried to rationalize them away.

"Dieser Gefangene war nach der Ausgangssperre draußen, Herr Kapitän." Langsmier's words brought him back into reality. "Ich habe mich noch nicht über seine Strafe entschieden."

Gale didn't catch everything, but the words 'prisoner' 'curfew' and 'punishment' he could easily pick up. He slammed his hand into the snow, hoping to find grounding pain in his numb fingers. He should have put his gloves on before leaving the library.

“Ja?” Gale ignored the Captain who was watching him. He couldn’t seem to get his attention to focus, his own breathing the only thing he could clearly hear. He looked around him at the snow. The snow that had ceased to be beautiful the more men had trampled on it. He absently wondered if the same thing was happening to him.

“Herr Major,” Gale’s attention snapped upward. He realized that he did recognize the man. He was one of the better guards. Kinder than some of the others. Always fair. And if nothing else there would be a witness for whatever happened next. “Is this true?”

He didn’t answer. He could guess roughly what had been said, but the less they thought he understood the better.

“Were you out past curfew?” The Captain supplied.

The question felt ironic. Of course he was out after curfew. It was after curfew. And he was out.

The Captain took a step closer, Gale tightened his hand around the snow, digging his numb into the ice. Slow controlled breaths kept him from answering. His voice would give away the panic. Then again his silence might be doing the same thing.

The Captain’s eyes scanned his face, no doubt seeing the bruising, the frozen specks of blood, and drawing his own conclusions. His past history with Langsmiere no doubt influencing his thoughts.

“Get up.” He ordered.

Buck struggled to get his limbs to cooperate, but was able to get to his feet. He didn’t wipe the snow off his coat or put his hands in his pocket. He only stood, staring straight forward.

The Captain frowned, glancing around the yard before falling back on the prisoner. “Perhaps I should be asking *what has caused* you to be out after curfew.”

“He fell in the snow.” Langsmier quickly supplied. “Hurt his face. Now he is late.”

An eyebrow raise was all the captain spared to his sergeant. “Herr Major?”

Buck’s eyes were drawn against his will to Langsmier. The sergeants eyes held a burning hatred, a need for vengeance. His previous words

played through Gale's head. *"Where is your little shadow? Perhaps we should ask if he wants to join us, ja?"* He took it for what it was. A threat on Bucky. A threat on his friends.

Gale could take the punches. Roll with the harassment.He'd done it his whole life. But he couldn't watch his friends be hurt. He couldn't let anyone else be targeted.

"I fell in the snow." He repeated, voice sounding rough to his own ears, a soreness lingering as he seemed to feel a phantom pressure on his throat. He tried to disregard the smirk that accompanied the new gleam in Langsmier's eyes. "I was heading into my barracks and I tripped, or slipped. It must have taken me a minute to reorient myself. Didn't mean to be out late."

"I see." And the Captain looked somehow… disappointed by answer. "Well," He glanced between guard and prisoner. "considering the circumstances I believe it would be wise to let the Major have a free pass tonight, ja?"

The glee dropped from Langsmier's face, his jaw tightening around the words: "Ja, Herr Kapitän."

"Get to your barracks, Major. Do not let this be repeated."

Gale knew he should acknowledge it. Say thank you. Offer a nod of appreciation. But he couldn't seem to muster an answer. His only goal was to reach his room before something else happened. Before Langsmier decided that he was not going to waist his opportunity to drag him away.

Custom would lead him to dust the snow off before going inside. It was something he had gotten onto his men for in the past. Tonight he didn't care.

Haphazardly, he threw the snow infested scarf around his mouth and neck, hoping it would hide most of the damage until he had time to think of an excuse. Of a way to keep Bucky from storming out of the barack and getting himself shot.

The hallway offered no real protection from the chill, but just the fact that there was a door safely between himself and the Germans who him dead- or worse- caused him to stop. What if he just… stayed here. Not forever. Just long enough to come back to himself. The hallways seemed an acute metaphor for the strange in between he found himself in. Not quite outside but certainly not in the safety of his

men.

It was unfair, really. To let the men worry even more than they likely already were. It was past curfew, the moments ticking by. He would hate to be in there waiting, wondering where Bucky was. He'd go crazy. He knew Bucky was going crazy.

Releasing a breath, he took the final steps towards his bunk room.

All eyes turned to him with the sound of the creaking door. A card game came to a halt, whispers dying off, as if Gale's return had momentarily put a pause on life. Bucky spun on his heels from where he had been pacing by their bunk.

Silence as Bucky came forward, pulling Buck, who had stopped in the doorway, the rest of the way in.

"Are you okay? What happened? Where were you?" The rapid fire questions paired poorly with the ache of Gale's thawing hands.

He could read the worry, panic, in Bucky's face but he didn't have the energy placate him. He wrenched his arm away, lucky he didn't topple over in the process. His balance was off, face aching, hands burning as feeling returned. The only thing he wanted was to be left alone.

"I'm fine. Lost track of time in the library."

"It's past curfew."

"Barely, stop worrying." It was hypocritical at best. The truth was he had no idea how long his little ordeal in the snow had taken. And if one of his men came in even at the tone he would've been all over it.

"You sure you're okay, Buck?" It was Benny, ignoring his cards to watch Buck's life fall apart.

"I'm fine." There was no reason for him to snap like that. Their concern was valid, more than they even knew. But his patience was gone, the pain of fear and exhaustion starting to dethaw just like his hands. "Mind your own business and stop acting like you've seen a ghost."

A beat of silence as dozens of eyes blinked in confusion, then, " I see your ten and raise you twenty." Like a pin drop, life returned to the bunkroom.

Gale released a breath, thankful that the attention was off of him. Well most of the attention.

“You’re soaked.” Bucky continued, mouth set with concern. “What happened?” A hand came forward, trying to help him out of his sodden coat.

“Stop it.” Gale snapped with more heat than he’d intended. He knew he wasn’t acting like himself but it was all too much. Too many hands. Too much touching. Too many people. Too many Sounds. Just too much.

He needed it to stop for just a minute. Stop and let him think. Let him breathe.

Stop like the when he was standing outside in the snow with no one else around.

Bucky took a step back, eyes holding so much fear and worry that Gale thought he might be sick. “Tell me what happened.”

His mind didn’t have time to come up with a new answer. “I tripped.” The lie had already been told once, it came even easier a second time.

Bucky’s eyes narrowed in disbelief. “You tripped?”

“The path between the barracks and the library is slick.” Gale pushed past his friend, not completely sure where he was heading. “We should probably think about shoveling it if it doesn’t melt soon.”

“You slipped in the snow?”

“Yes.”

Bucky was staring at his back. He could feel the eyes boring into him. The coat and scarf needed to come off. It was the next natural progression. But he didn’t want to. It would reveal the lie only moments after it had been told. It would start the questions back. He wondered for a moment if he could get away with just sleeping in them. And on some days he probably could. But his clothes were soaked. It would only cause more concern.

Keeping his back turned, he signed, aching fingers beginning to untangle the scarf from his neck.

“You’re never late. You’re normally early. ” John just wouldn't leave it

alone, circling to cut off Gale. “You’re always on about not taking chances about not-” His words trailed off, ripping the scarf away.

“Who did this to you.” The words were low but spoken with enough force that the room had gone quiet again.

“I’m fine.” He restated, feeling the panic begin to gnaw at his chest. “Dont worry about it.”

“I am worrying about it. Who hurt you?”

Gale finally succeeded in taking the scarf back. “I told you I fell.”

“Yeah, because everyone gets a handprint on their throat when they fall in the snow.”

Gale released a breath, hoping it sounded more like an annoyed huff than a last ditch effort at dispelling the panic threatening to burst out.

“I'm fine, John. Drop it. It’s not that bad.”

“Not that- what else?” He reached up, trying to gauge the damage.

Gale knocked his hand away. “Leave it.”

Bucky didn’t, finally succeeding in placing a hand on his face. Examining the bruised cheek and split lip. Gale could feel his right eye wanting to swell, the puffiness of breached skin and dried blood. But all of that seemed to disappear at the sensation of hands touching him.

“Don’t touch me.” He growled, pushing his friend back. Bucky stumbled a step, mouth dropping open in surprise.

He couldn’t do this right now. It was too much. All too much. His coat was suffocating him. The eyes of his men making him feel like a sideshow freak. A strange buzzing beginning to take up residence in his ears while his vision blurred.

He blinked rapidly, praying it was some psychological effect and not tears blocking his vision.

Turning away, he tried to shuck off his coat, fingers being uncooperative.

They were shaking now, making every movement harder to control. He finally managed to rip the coat free, throwing it down on his bunk.

He'd regret it later. The snow would get onto it and melt and make it cold and wet and useless just like he was cold and wet and useless and why was it so quiet why couldn't every just mind their own business why couldn't he just-

"Buck." The voice was quiet this time.

Gale leaned his forehead against the cold wood of the bunk.

"Buck, look at me. Please."

It was slow and reluctant, but he obeyed.

Bucky didn't say anything, just looked at him with that look reserved only for him. The one that said *"Please. You can talk to me. Don't push me away."*

Gale opened his mouth, trying to find the words to say, trying to make everything make sense.

But, he couldn't. All that came out was a puff of air as he shook his head.

"Not tonight, Bucky. I can't. Just- Not tonight."

It was a lie.

Not tonight. But not tomorrow either. Not ever.

"Okay, Buck. That's okay."

It wasn't. They both knew it wasn't.

But that was tomorrow's problem.

Chapter End Notes

Evil Laughter
This one was so much fun to write and despite the fact that it took forever to get "right" I'm happy with where it is.
I do have a second part plan dealing with the next day. My only tease for it is that Gale is not handling it well and he may start to take it out on someone close to him 👀

I'm publishing this because I ran out of motivation so please comment so that the brain juices come back lol.

Would love to hear any thoughts

Much love and God bless,
Jamie

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

> Hey guys!!
> This chapter took me FOREVER to write.
> I know I said this would be the last one... but when I finished it, it was almost 8k words and I (personal) don't like to post chapters over 5k. I know people in general don't have a problem with it, but it's just my preference. So I split it up.
> The GOOD news is that sense I did not know I was going to do this until today, the next chapter is completely finished! So I'll post it sometime tomorrow!
>
> I updated the tags so make sure to take a glance at them before reading!
>
> Hope you enjoy ＜3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was cold. That was Gale's first thought upon waking. It was followed quickly by the fact that there was a dull ache throughout most of his body. Like he had a flu.

A flu was something he could not afford. None of them could afford. Pain he could handle. Sickness could be spread. Sickness could kill.

But he wasn't sick and he knew that. And he wasn't going to think about it.

He wasn't going to think about why he was in pain because that would require him to revisit the events of the night before.

He'd managed to slip into bed without anyone else bothering him. It was cold but Buck had refused to share a bunk with anyone. Even Bucky. He could see the hurt flash in his eyes but he just couldn't do it. He couldn't have someone that close to him. Not when his skin was still crawling with the deep sense of uncleanness.

Sleep had come. Eventually. But it hadn't been restful. He'd found himself clutching at his chest, trying to force his pounding heart to slow and remove the rushing sound in his ears. Sometimes an adrenaline crash would force him to sleep. But he supposed he never really crashed, the adrenaline pulsing through him, waking him up

anytime he got relatively close to rest. He was more tired now than he had been the night before.

He was just thankful that he hadn't dreamed.

All he needed was to cry out in the middle of the night and have Bucky come running. He didn't need Bucky to fix him. He didn't need to be fixed.

He was fine.

The walls seemed to be closing in around him. Every one of these men depended on him and he had nothing to offer them.

He shook his head, releasing a breath.

Things could be thought about and dealt with later.

Right now his only goal was to escape the claustrophobia of the bunk room before anyone tried to talk to him. He didn't know what he'd say. He didn't want questions or thoughts or platitudes. He wanted to be left alone.

He already knew that he wouldn't be good company today. He was tired and his throat hurt and even the sounds of his men breathing was too loud. He didn't want to try to talk. He just knew it would hurt. It would sound bad.

There would be no permanent damage. It's not like he couldn't breathe. It was just painful and annoying. Like a left over from a bad cold.

Maybe he *was* coming down with something.

Gale finished dressing in silence, wrapping his scarf tightly around his neck before putting on his coat. They slept in most of his outerwear these days. Warmer that way.

The lack of mirror was honestly a relief. There was nothing he could do for his face. He pulled up the collar of his coat hoping it masked, or at least distracted, from the bruises.

"Where ya goin'?" Bucky's sleep filled whisper stopped him before he could make it out of the room.

"Going to the latrine." He lied. That had become a habit as of late. Lying was easier than telling the truth. Than admitting what he was

feeling. Than worrying those around him.

The creaking of weight shifting on a bunk made Gale close his eyes. “Shouldn’t go alone.”

“It’s fine.”

“No. I’m coming.”

He could just leave before Bucky had time to get his shoes on, but that would confirm the fact that something was wrong and that Buck was avoiding him.

Instead he didn’t answer. He stood by the door, trying not to lean too heavily on the frame. His head was already pounding.

Gale didn’t actually have to go to the bathroom. If anything he wanted a shower. The showers weren’t open yet. He had just said it so that Bucky would leave him alone. A plan that had obviously failed.

“Into the winter wonderland.” Bucky commented before leading the way out of the barrack.

It was warmer than it had been the previous day. The snow had started to melt, leaving a thick brown sludge instead of fluffy white snow.

“We need to shovel this before it freezes again.” He noted absentmindedly.

Bucky rolled his eyes. “Can’t you take a nice stroll without thinking about what needs to be done.”

It was meant lightly. It wasn’t a reprimand. That didn’t stop the bitterness from trying to claw out of his chest. Gale bit back his answer, opting to remain silent. No. He couldn’t not think about what needed to be done. Bucky had made it clear that he’d rather wallow in self pity than take a leadership role here. So Gale would have to shoulder it for both of them.

They stopped outside the latrine and Gale could no longer hold his tongue. “What are you doing here, Bucky?”

The look he gave Buck was so obnoxiously innocent. “Going to the bathroom?”

“You’re following me.”

“It made sense-”

The irritation broke free. “Stop playin’ games. You plannin’ to follow me around the rest of the war?”

“If that’s what it takes.” And he sounded so sure of himself. So casual. Like this was just another one of his stupid baseball conversations.

Gale’s jaw tightened. “If that’s what it takes to what?”

“Make sure you don’t *slip* again.”

It was Gale’s turn to roll his eyes. “I told you. I’m fine.” He tried to make his voice sound resolute, ignoring the strained sound of his words. It was even more of a lie today than it had been last night.

“Just tell me who it was, Buck.” The nonchalance was dropped, a pleading taking over his tone. “Then I can stop worrying about it.”

But that’s not what would happen. Either Bucky would go off half cocked and try to enact vengeance, or he’d really never let Gale out of his sight for the rest of the war. He was already proving he was more than willing to do the latter. It made Buck feel trapped more than the barbed wire or the guards.

He meant to express that. Explain that Bucky finding out would do more harm than good. Reasonably lay out the facts and get Bucky to understand his reasoning behind keeping things quiet.

Instead what came out of his mouth was a seething: “Stay out of my business. If I wanted you to know, I’d tell you. Leave it.”

The words had left quicker than Gale could stop them. He spun around, more trying to hide the embarrassment than actually trying to get away. Bucky wouldn’t retaliate in front of the men. Probably. He just had to get back to the bunkroom. He hadn’t needed the latrine anyway.

~MotA~

Gale leaned against the barrack, watching some of the boys play an unofficial baseball game. It was really too cold for this. It made sense for those working up a sweat in the yard, but this weather wasn’t meant for standing. His reasoning for being out was simple. He was avoiding Bucky.

He hadn’t seen him since this morning. Gale had decided staying out in the open would be the easiest way to avoid a confrontation. Bucky could be reckless, but he wasn’t stupid. He was currently playing cards in the barrack, not willing to brave the cold even for his beloved baseball. Or maybe he was in on the avoidance game.

One of the men fell more than slid into third base. The ground really was slick. He wished the snow would melt on its own. It held no logic, but he somehow felt that if the snow melted this dark feeling inside of him would go away too. He should probably start a rotation for shoveling the snow. If it melted and refroze during the night it would turn to ice and they didn’t have the resources to deal with injuries right now.

But he just… didn’t want to. He was tired. He didn’t want to tell anyone what to do. Let them figure it out themselves. Or someone else can take command. He didn’t want it. He wanted to go bury himself in a book until the guards had to drag him back into his barrack.

His wrist hurt and his right eye was a little blurry. His shoulder was bothering him too. It hadn’t been quite right since he was shot down and he must have jarred it when he fell. It didn’t matter. Not really. He was no stranger to pain. He’d get over it.

He should go inside. Somewhere warmer. But Bucky was inside and he didn’t particularly want to deal with him at the moment. His concern made Gale’s skin crawl. Sometimes it was appreciated but right now, he just wanted to move on like it had never happened. He didn’t want to think about it. He didn’t want Bucky going off the deep end and getting himself shot. He didn’t want anyone, not even Bucky, to know the words spoken to him. To know why he was a target.

“Major.”

Gale jerked to attention at the Colonel's sudden appearance. He'd been too lost in thought to notice his approach and felt embarrassment flare in his chest.

The older man chuckled quietly. “As you were, I just came to check in on you.”

“I'm fine sir.” He relaxed but didn't lean back against the wall. An uneasiness settled in his gut when he considered the Colonel’s reason for seeking him out.

There was a long moment of silence, Alkire joining Gale in watching

the game.

“Been in a fight?” The words were said casually. They shouldn’t have been. If he was being accused of fighting with subordinates the conversation would be different.

Gale’s coat was buttoned, his scarf hiding the bruising on his neck, but nothing could hide the shiner on his face.

“No sir, just… a mishap. It's nothing.”

“I heard it might be something.”

Gale’s cheeks flushed pink. “I'm fine sir.” He didn’t know what else to say. Was there anything else to say? He was fine. He was fine and he refused to drag anyone else into this mess with him.

“I have a feeling you wouldn't tell me if you weren't. What happened?”

Bucky. It had to be Bucky. No one else would dare. No one else was crazy enough to go to Colonel with this.

He glanced at the Colonel, weighing his options. He could outright lie. Tell the same story he'd been telling. It’s what his instincts were screaming at him to do. What he had been raised to do.

But instead he turned his eyes back out towards the men. “I’m okay, sir. There was a mishap last night but I took care of it. It won’t happen again.”

Except it would. It would happen again and again and again. As long as he was here, Langsmier would keep trying. He would just have to be better at staying away. Keep better track of the rotation schedule.

Because if it happened again Gale wouldn’t hesitate to run straight at the gate. Let him die with the rest of his dignity.

The Colonel sighed. “I want you to think for a moment, Buck. If you found out that one of your men was being mistreated, hurt, how would you feel?”

Gale’s jaw tightened. He'd feel awful. He'd want to know so he could take care of it. He'd want to make sure that they were okay.

But that's not what this was. He wasn't some lieutenant who needed to be cared for. He could take care of himself. He'd been doing so his

entire life. He didn't need people in his business. Didn't need them to know the way Langsmier's touch seemed to linger on his skin. He didn't need people knowing. He didn't need his friends getting hurt because of him.

And yet a deep part of him wanted it all to spill out. Wanted to explain everything in detail. It was the same childish desire that he'd had to bite back all of his upbringing. His dad would always tell him how much trouble they'd all get in. That things would just be worse if he told people how they lived.

The same thing would happen now. If he told, things would only get worse. Not better. And yet-

"Sgt. Langsmier." The words are out of his mouth before he can second guess himself.

The Colonel seems perfectly neutral about the situation. "What happened?"

And now that he'd opened his mouth, he couldn't seem to stop the words from tumbling out. The desire for someone else to know, to understand, momentarily overrode his desire for privacy.

"I was on my way back to my Barack and he cornered me. Knocked me around a bit is all. Wouldn't let me leave until after curfew."

"He do that to your face?"

Gale nodded, his jaw tightening. Now that the rush of words had been expelled, he only wanted the conversation to be over. The exhaustion that had been haunting him all day, haunting him for weeks, threatened to take over. The adrenaline that had been pumping through him since last night seemed to finally dissipate, bringing a dizziness that threatened to drop him to his knees.

"I'll take care of this."

For some reason that only made the yawning pit in his stomach grow. The world around him oscillated between bright white and a strange dimness. He leaned back into the wall for support.

"Is there anything else I should know?"

He wanted to shake his head. He wanted this all to stop. He wanted it to be over. But the hand wrapped around his chest squeezed and the

words gushed out of his mouth.

“He said things.” His mind was screaming at him to shut up. But he couldn’t keep it inside. “about the men.” A shuddered breath released against his will. Then much quieter, he finally admitted the truth, “about me.”

“Such as?”

The Colonel knew Gale wasn't trying to waste his time. If he didn't have something important he wouldn't have have brought it up.

“He was- he's been trying-.” He had to stop, releasing a frustrated breath. “He *wants* me.” And the great Buck Cleven was going to throw up all over his shoes if this conversation didn’t end soon.

The Colonel's eyes darkened. “I see.”

“There was a- uhm a Captain. I don’t- I’ve seen him around but- well he stopped it. Sent me back to my barrack.” This was embarrassing. Like he’d forgotten how to form sentences.

He needed to stop.

Alkire didn’t care.

He had more important things to worry about.

But he did care.

And that was the problem.

Why did it always seem like people only cared when you wanted them to leave you alone? But when you actually wanted, *needed* , help you were left to fend for yourself?

“Stay in public areas until this gets sorted out, don’t go off alone.” The order was one Gale had little intention to follow, but he understood the sentiment. “I’ll keep you updated.”

The only words he could force out from his aching throat were a whispered. “Thank you, sir.”

The Colonel nodded and made quick steps away. Towards the komendanture.

Gale felt like he was being led before a firing squad.

Maybe that would be better.

His head connected with the wall behind him. He squeezed his eyes shut and delivered quick breaths out his nose.

His heart was pounding and the cold inside of him was starting to melt away.

A fire being lit, one that wanted to burn everything to the ground.

This was all Bucky's fault.

All of this.

He went to the Colonel.

He got him into this mess.

When Gale had specifically asked him to stay out of it.

The embers ignited and he took off towards his barrack.

For the first time in weeks Gale didn't feel cold. There was a blaze inside him, sparked by rage. In a moment of deja vu all heads turned to him as he slammed the bunkroom door open.

"Everyone out." He ordered in a voice that gave no room for arguments.

Bucky frowned, rising from his place at the table, eyes filling with concern. "What seems to be the problem, Buck?"

"Not you. You stay." Gale hissed in answer. "Everyone else out."

There were only about half a dozen men in the room, but their eyes darted between the two majors before Bucky finally gave a hesitant nod.

As the door closed he leaned against the bunk, a cocky smile slipping into place. "Well you got me alone. Is something wrong or did you just miss me?" It was a deflection to hide his worry. It didn't stop the flame inside of Gale growing ten fold.

"You had no right." He ground out, taking three quick steps forward then stopping. If he got any closer he might actually throw a punch. He wanted the feeling of skin pounding skin. It would feel good. Release some of the growing pressure.

It was all consuming. Fire. Anger. *Hatred* . (Just like his father.)

“I’m in a POW camp, Buck. Don’t have many rights to begin with. Be more specific.”

“You went to the colonel. You had no right to get him involved. None! I told you to leave it. I told you I was fine!”

Bucky pushed off the bunk, grin disappearing. “I had to. You’re not fine and you refuse to tell me what happened. Somethings wrong and you’re proving it to me right now. What happened last night?”

“I told you what happened!”

“And I told *you* that you don’t get a hand print on your neck from a slip in the snow! You came in well after curfew looking like you’ve been in a bar fight and refusing to let anyone get near you!” He stepped forward, coming to meet Gale in the middle of the room. “Why aren’t you telling me? If there’s a guard that’s harassing you why won’t you just tell me?”

Something about the sincerity in his voice set off a viciousness. “Why do you even care?” He snapped, feeling like a junkyard yanking at his chain.

Bucky blinked, physically reeling at the words. “Why do I- what kind of question is that? Of course I care!”

“You don’t care.” And for the second time today his words were passing straight through the carefully constructed mask of Major Cleven without permission. “You don’t care about anyone but yourself!”

“What?” This whisper would have deflated Gale on a normal day, but not today. Not right now.

“You haven’t cared about anything or anyone since getting here! Why would you start now?!”

“Buck-”

“For months I’ve been waiting for you to snap out of whatever *this* was. I’ve tried to help but you don’t want it so I backed off.”

“I didn’t-”

“I didn’t get the higher ups mixed up in this! I didn’t go tattle like an

immature schoolboy!”

“ Buck please-”

“*You* get to check out. *You* get to have no responsibilities because *I* pick up the slack for you. And all I ask of you is to stay out of my business and you can’t even do that!”

“Buck take a breath you’re scarin’ me.” He looked like he wasn’t sure if he should rush forward or stumble back.

“You think the winter has been easy for me? You think I don’t wish I could push it all on someone else? I don’t have that option.”

“I didn’t mean-”

“I don’t care! You got that? I don’t care what you do. Go back into your own head or wherever you went just don’t act like you suddenly care.”

“I *do* care. How could you-”

“Stay out of my business and I’ll stay out of yours.”

John seemed to make his decision, coming forward and grabbing Gale by the shoulders. “Buck, look at me.” He gave a firm shake. “I don’t know what’s going on with you but you’ve got to talk to me. Whatever you’re bottling up, it's killing you. Just talk to me.”

He shoved him away, taking the smallest pride in the way Bucky stumbled back. He wanted to lash out. Wanted to fight. A part of him knew that it wasn’t Bucky who he wanted to make bleed, but he couldn’t strike at who he wanted without getting shot. It was taking all of his self control to not come in swinging and Bucky seemed determined to push him past his limit for tolerance.

“You think you’re proving that you’re fine? Is that what you think you’re doing?” John stepped forward until the two majors were face to face. “All you’re doing is proving that I was right to go to the Colonel.”

A twig snapped free from the fire inside of him, igniting down his arm to the point he had no control over it. His fist came up, no clear aim in sight, but landing in the general direction of Bucky’s nose. Blood made an appearance, John’s hand rising to meet it.

Bucky had never looked so surprised. Guilt should come now. It probably was buried in there somewhere. But all Gale felt in the moment was satisfaction. Relief. Release.

(A voice in the back of his mind wondered if that's how his father had felt.)

Refusing to give in he made his mission to drown out the voice, letting the anger escape one last time.

"Stay out of my business, Egan. I'm not telling you again."

Bucky was staring at him, mouth ajar, hand catching the leaking blood.

Gale spun on his heels, letting the new adrenaline rush fuel him out of the hut. He felt oddly satisfied when the door slammed behind him.

As soon as he stepped outside Brady gave him one glance, eyes unreadable, and headed quickly back inside.

Benny was watching him and looked like he wanted to say something. Gale glared at him, daring him to comment on simmering embers glowing beneath the major's skin. DeMarco raised his hands in surrender, offering a final glance before following his friend inside.

Now alone, Buck wasn't sure exactly what to do. The relief was starting to wear off, the euphoria of the strike dissipating and being replaced with an aching hand.

The world seemed to solidify around him. He blinked as if seeing reality for the first time in days. His hands shook, breath catching.

What had he done?

The look on Bucky's face was seared into his memory.

What was he doing?

Why had he done that?

Who was that back there?

The man who had been standing in the bunkroom more closely resembled a James Cleven than a Buck.

He needed-

He needed to go apologize.

Beg for forgiveness.

But he couldn't.

He couldn't face them.

He couldn't face Brady and Benny.

He couldn't face Bucky.

A layer of embarrassment seemed to cement around him, dissipating any remaining embers and filling him with frozen sludge.

And there was still a part of him- a part he hated but couldn't control- that felt he was in the right.

Nothing he said had been inaccurate. Bucky had disobeyed his wishes. Bucky had been stuck in his head. Bucky was a mess.

And yet-

His head was all screwed up.

He couldn't think straight.

For a split second the shocked look of Bucky's face morphed into that of Sgt. Langmier's and it felt *good* .

He pressed the back of his hand into his forehead, closing his eyes and releasing a breath.

Exhaustion threatened to overtake him.

He needed to snap out of it.

He was losing it.

At least Bucky had had his skull bashed in before arriving at the Stalag, what was Gale's excuse?

Running his shaking hand down his face he opened his eyes, cursing the snow that seemed intent on burning his retinas and freezing his soul.

"Major Cleven."

Gale snapped his head to the left, feeling bile rise at the sign of Alkire walking towards him.

He cleared his throat. “Is something wrong Colonel?”

“The Commandant would like to speak with you.”

He was suddenly thankful that he’d missed the last couple of meals, otherwise he’d embarrass himself with vomiting up precious resources.

“Is there a problem?”

“He just has some questions for you. I’ll be there as well.” He nodded, keeping his tone neutral but reassuring. “I’m not throwing you to the wolves, Major.”

Gale nodded, not having the energy to fake a smile.

Despite everything, in that moment, Gale wished for nothing more than to have Bucky by his side.

But he’d probably ruined that. Doubted Bucky would ever want to be by his side again.

The walk to the Komendanture, felt like one of the longest in his life. Even with Colonel Alkire, a man he respected, who had vowed to protect him, he couldn’t seem to keep his heart from beating wildly out of his chest.

At the rate he was going he was going to have a heart attack before the war was done. At least then all of this would be over.

This was why he didn’t want anyone knowing. This is why he didn’t want anyone involved.

In a Prisoner of War camp, any attention was bad attention. You wanted to fly under the radar. Even if the commandant was a reasonable man, even if he was going to try and help him, this meant that he was officially on the radar as a troublemaker. He couldn’t afford that. Not when the men were so twitchy. Not when he knew he needed to be the mediator. Not when Bucky could snap at any minute and he’d have to run interference.

And after the whole radio thing his whole hut was already on the watch list.

“Major, thank you for joining me.” Buck brought himself back to the present, offering a proper military salute. He hated it. Hated *them* . These men didn’t deserve his respect. “At ease.”

He was instructed to stand in front of the Commandant's desk. The Colonel stood beside him at parade rest.

“Major Cleven, Colonel Alkire has implied there may have been some… unauthorized punishments as of late.” He could feel the man’s eyes on him, scanning his face, taking in the split lip and bruised cheek. “I have also been informed that this may not have been the first time such a thing has occurred”

Gale couldn’t seem to find his voice. His eyes darted over the Colonel who gave him a nod. “Yes sir.” he finally managed.

“When did this incident take place?”

This time he resisted the urge to look at his commander, maintaining eye contact with the German Colonel. “It began just before curfew, sir. He refused to allow me to return to my barrack.”

“And he struck you?”

His mouth felt dry, his throat closing in on him. “Yes sir.”

“More than once.” It was not a question.

“Yes sir.”

“And then he let you go?”

A brief pause. “No, no sir. Another guard, a Captain, came along and stopped it. I’m not sure of his name, sir.”

The commandant nodded. “This matches the report given to me, both by your Colonel and my Captain.” Then looking at Gale carefully, he sighed. “I am aware that you have been largely responsible for keeping the men under control. You do not cause problems and hold great sway over the men. I will deal with my Sergeant. But Major,” Gale felt his pounding heart nearly stop at the sharpness of the tone. “This is twice now that an altercation between you and a guard has been brought to my attention. If this continues, I will be forced to assume that you are the instigator, not the victim. Am I understood?”

Gale could barely get his mouth to move. His head nodded while he

worked to force out a quiet, “Yes Commandant.”

“Very good, dismissed.”

Buck wasted no time offering a salute and exiting the Komendanture. The Colonel was close behind him.

It felt like he breathed in the first breath in hours when he was finally out in the cold. He knew he must be as pale as the snow around him. His shoulder ached and his bruised lip pounded with his heart.

“Thank you, Buck.” The Colonel’s voice was uncharacteristically quiet. “This was for the best.”

How was it for the best? How was now officially having two strikes against him, neither of which his own fault, for the best?

A hand gripped his shoulder. “Try to stay in public areas until everything is sorted out. When I know more I’ll inform you.”

As the Colonel walked away Gale stood motionless in the snow, trying to still his racing heart.

The last thing he needed was to be in a crowd. He needed to think, or better yet, he needed a distraction.

Assuming Bucky was still in the barracks that was off limits.

There wasn’t a stove in the library, but there were four walls and an escape from the eyes of his men. It would have to do.

Chapter End Notes

> This is the longer part of the split chapter, the resolution will come tomorrow. (And it gets worse before it gets better *hides behind laptop*)
>
> Please let me know what you thought of this chapter! Our boys are fighting and it breaks my heart (and yet I love it okay I love that trope).
>
> Thank you all for your patience in waiting for this chapter. I hit a real depressive slump and just could NOT get out of it. But I'm doing much better and was finally able to put together a finished project I'm proud of of.
>
> I look forward to your thoughts!

Much love and God bless,
Jamie

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

> And here we are. The final piece of the puzzle.
> The ending was one of the hardest parts for me to write because sometimes when I write I put everything into the hurt and then forget there is supposed to be a comfort lol. But I think I'm happy with where it ended.
> I'm going to ramble a bit at the bottom so I'll let you get to reading this final chapter now.
> Please enjoy ＜3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was the same Agatha Christie book he had been reading yesterday.

Yesterday?

Had everything really happened in less than twenty-four hours?

It felt like a lifetime.

A lifetime since he'd screwed everything up.

Bucky had to hate him. He had every reason to.

What he'd done was inexcusable.

And now he was on the Commandant's radar. That was the last thing he had wanted. It didn't matter. Good or bad. Once you were noticed you weren't forgotten. He'd be looking over his shoulder the rest of his time here. Probably the rest of his life as it was looking more and more like he'd die before he ever stepped foot out of that gate again.

Whether it would be sickness or a guard or an accident. He was going to die here. What was even the point in denying it? He might as well hurry it along. Grab a guards gun. Run at the fence. Try to escape.

Something to keep this misery from consuming him.

The guard would be dealt with.

What did that even mean?

Nothing good. And Langsmier had friends. What's to stop them from-

“Buck.”

Gale flinched back at the hand on his shoulder, dropping the book onto the table with a thud. His exhaustion was the only thing keeping Brady from having a bloody nose.

What was the kid even doing here? What time was it?

He glanced at his watch, noting the late hour. How long had he been staring at the same page?

Looking up he caught Brady’s frown. The kid had probably come to yell at him about hurting Bucky. He probably deserved it.

“You should come to dinner.” He spoke instead. “You didn't come to lunch and Bu- I wanted to make sure you got something to eat.”

Gale shook his head absently. Bucky. Still looking after him. Still trying to take care of him.

But keeping his distance.

Sending Brady to try and keep Buck from lashing out again.

Was that for Buck’s benefit or his own?

The softness of the gesture was met with the petulant inner thought of “at least he actually noticed.”

How many meals has Buck skipped whether intentionally or not? And this was only one of a handful of times anyone had called him out on it.

It was like someone was playing tug-of-war with his emotions. He couldn’t think straight anymore. It was like the weather. Generally pleasant and then a snowstorm out of nowhere. That’s what his mind felt like. Like anytime he had a pleasant thought a blizzard would come and wipe it out.

But he knew he wasn’t imagining this.

Something was different. Bucky- all of them- seemed to be… worried about him. It was strange. He wasn't usually the one people were concerned was gonna break.

Men had come to him with concerns for their friends, themselves, or even for Bucky. But this was the first time it felt like any of the

attention was on him.

His life long mantra of “I'm fine” was beginning to hold no weight.

He was failing. Failing them all.

If he couldn't keep himself in one piece how would the men? If he couldn't hold himself together, how was he supposed to hold them together?

He was failing them.

He couldn’t keep them warm and he couldn’t keep them fed and he couldn’t keep them safe.

They were all going to die and it was going to be his fault.

His fault. Not anyone else's, his.

He was the calm one. He stayed collected.

That was his job. Get them through the war.

And he'd already lost men.

Good men.

He’d lose more now.

He’d lose Bucky.

He’d probably already lost him.

“Buck!”

Gale looked down to where his hands were shaking. He could hear himself breathing. That was never a good thing.

His eyes trailed up to Brady who was just as pale as Gale imagined himself to be.

“Im’ alright. I’m fine.” He said, running a trembling hand through his hair. He wasn’t sure if he was trying to convince himself or Brady.

“You look it.” Brady answered without humor. “Come get some dinner.”

“No,” Gale cleared his throat, shaking his head. “No, I’m good. I’m not

hungry."

He felt empty, but not hungry. He wasn't sure he could stomach any food right now.

When was the last time he had eaten? Lunch yesterday? Had he eaten then? He couldn't remember.

"Come on, Major." There was a pleading note in the lieutenant's voice. "You're the one always telling us we need to keep our strength up in here. It may not be good grub, but it's better than nothing, right?"

Gale let his hand run down his face. He needed to pull himself together. This was getting ridiculous.

He was just… tired. And cold. And tired some more.

"Yeah, yeah okay, Brady." He finally answered.

Brady slapped him on the back as Gale stood and buttoned his coat.

Buck hesitated at the door, getting an unsettling sense of deja vu. Brady gave him a questioning glance, and Gale nodded for him to go ahead. He looked suspicious but walked out first.

He wasn't completely sure why he couldn't bring himself to step out. It just felt too familiar. He probably should have avoided the library altogether. But it felt stupid. There was nothing wrong. He was fine. Wasn't that what he kept telling everyone?

And Langsmier would be dealt with. That had to be good, right? In the end?

Things had to get better from here.

He couldn't imagine things getting worse.

That was a lie.

He could.

But he was tired of thinking about it.

Every step across the yard seemed to take all of his effort. A strange buzzing in his head saying that something was going to go wrong.

Something wasn't right.

Something-

“Cleven!” The name was a growl but the voice was all too familiar.

Brady stopped in front of him, turning to stare and Gale was torn between flight or freeze.

The idea of Brady in the crossfire finally sent him to action.

“Go, don't stop.” He said desperately, pushing Brady forward towards the barracks.

They weren't fast enough. Gale was wrenched from behind by a harsh grip on his arm. He bit off the cry, only allowing a small puff of air to show the pain.

“Das hast du geschafft! Du! Du stehst hinter meinem Transfer, ich weiß es! Dafür werde ich dich töten!”

Transfer? So that's what ‘take care of’ meant. Which would be great if Gale had made it into the mess hall before Langsmier got a hold of him.

He had no doubt that Langsmier would carry out his promise. The German would kill him.

Gale was shoved back. His balance had been off all day so it was no surprise he fell into the snow.

Someone was yelling. Brady? But there was a buzzing in his ears keeping him from fully comprehending.

Gale pushed himself up. An audience would always give him the strength to push through. He couldn’t be weak. He had to be an example. He had to get up.

Unfortunately, the choice was not his. A boot came down on his chest. This time he did cry out, falling backwards. His head bounced off the slick ice causing the world to dim for a moment.

It came back into roaring clarity with the realization that he couldn't breathe.

The reason was twofold. The first being the pressure on his chest where he was being straddled by Langsmier, the second being the hands wrapped tightly around his throat.

Gale gasped, trying to force air through his restricted airways. His hands scrabbled at the grip, panic outweighing his normal complacency. His nails filled with blood as he attempted to scratch away the angel of death.

There was a shout and the dim sound of snow crunching beneath feet. Brady. He was probably leaving. It was for the best. Brady shouldn't see this. No one should. And yet the idea of being alone terrified him.

Words were said over him, cutting in and out with his pulsing vision. Langsmier was saying… something. Gale couldn't think enough to translate, he could barely even hear the words.

Shouting, footsteps, more shouting.

He couldn't follow it.

It felt like he was underwater.

Like he was drowning.

Like the world was ending.

Like he was dying.

Oh.

Yeah.

That was it.

He was dying.

The thought wasn't as terrifying as it probably should be.

In fact there was the smallest molecule of relief.

At least this would be over.

His body seemed to agree with him.

He saw more than felt his hands stop, no longer trying to push the offending grasp away.

He couldn't feel much of anything.

The numbness that had been residing in his chest spread outward.

Everything felt floaty and… nice.

Peaceful.

“Hey!” One voice broke through static that had taken over his senses.

He knew that voice.

He knew the anger.

He knew he deserved the anger.

But it wasn’t pointed at him.

It should be.

The voice was saying something else but he couldn’t understand it. The buzzing was getting louder. More high pitched. Like his brain was a radio on the wrong frequency.

The blur of his vision was growing in darkness, the edges fading from blurred colors to grey, then to black.

He was just-

He was just so tired.

But in an instant the pressure was gone.

Gale choked on the shock of cold air as his lungs tried to fill.

His body was so heavy he wasn’t sure how he managed to roll over. Probably the instinctual panic.

Gagging into the frozen slush nothing came up but acid. It burned his already aching throat. He shoved at the ground, trying to gain some leverage but his arms couldn’t hold him up.

“Buck, hey, hey, look at me, please.” He was rolled back over so he was on his back. His eyes found Bucky and he wasn't sure where the tears were coming from. His eyes continued to sting along with his throat.

“Hey, stay with me okay, you’re going to be okay.”

A knot of guilt was building in Gale’s gut. He wanted to cry. Sob like a baby in Bucky’s arms.

He had been awful to him.

He needed to apologize.

He needed to fix everything.

But he couldn't get a full breath of air in and the dusk was still encroaching on his vision.

"No, no hey, you're not allowed to- Buck please." Hands gripped the front of his shirt. He tried to smile but it probably came out more a grimace. He couldn't keep his eyes open.

But it was okay.

Bucky was there.

A hand cupped his cheek. "Gale," He wasn't sure if it was actually a whisper or if Bucky's strong voice was simply lost to the darkness.

~MotA~

Pain was the first thing that fully broke through. Pain… everywhere.

The second thing was a muttered voice coming somewhere from his left.

"Pray for us sinners,

now and-" there was a shuttered breath in place of the rest of the line.

Now and in the hour of our death. Gale mentally filled it in. He'd heard it enough.

But Bucky continued on without it.

"Amen."

Gale managed to force his eyes open, blinking up at the room that was not his own. It was the infirmary. He avoided this place at all costs. Hated the way it made him feel and the way it let the Germans involved in yet another piece of his life.

"Hail, Mary, full of grace,

the Lord is with thee." The words began again.

It was more of a head flop than an actual turn, but it achieved the same effect.

He wasn't surprised to see John Bucky Egan sitting in the chair against the wall. He was surprised to see him bent over and clutching the cross pendant that he knew was Bucky's mother's.

"Blessed art thou amongst women

and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus.

Holy Mary, Mother of God,"

"It must be real bad if *you're* praying for me." His voice was rough and it was surprisingly painful to talk. But it was worth it to see John's head shoot up and for him to tumble out of the chair until he was standing by Gale's cot.

"Yeah, well, you could use all the help you could get." It was said on a breath and didn't hold the same humor he was likely going for. "How are you feeling?"

That was a great question.

Everything hurt but it was also hidden just under a layer of what he could only assume was morphine. That sent a stab of guilt. They needed morphine. They didn't have enough for what was needed, much less for him.

His throat ached, fighting for every word to make it out. His bad shoulder felt wrong but it hurt most of the time anyway.

"I'm okay." He finally answered.

Bucky laughed, running a hand down his face. "Like I haven't heard that before."

Gale moved so he was looking up at the ceiling, feeling forbidden tears try to fill his eyes. "I'm sorry." He finally said the words he'd been wanting- needing to say. "I'm so sorry.

He meant for all of it. For everything. For harsh words and not listening and worst of all- "Is your nose okay?" he turned back to look at his friend.

"It's fine. Didn't even break. I've gotten worse in a bar."

“I shouldn’t have hit you. That wasn’t- it’s not okay.”

“Hey,” A hand touched his arm. “It *is* okay. And if you need to hear me say it, I forgive you. Besides, you had other things on your mind.”

Other things. That was one way to put it.

“I shouldn’t have been goading you anyway.”

“No you were right.” Buck confessed, closing his eyes to keep his composure. “I never would have told the Colonel.”

“And maybe things wouldn’t have escalated.”

Gale looked at him, hating the guilt that came through his voice and shone on his face.

“No, they would have.” Gale admitted. He had known it as soon as Langsmier’s hands were around his neck. It was always going to end like that. “It was bound to happen it just… happened a little faster.”

“They transferred him.” Bucky spit out the words. “Locked him up in the cooler then shipped him out the next day. He deserves much worse.”

The next day? Wait. “How long have I been out?”

“Uh,” he glanced at the clock on the wall. “Three days? I don’t know I kinda lost track of time.”

“Three-”

Three days? How-?

“Had you on oxygen for awhile but you’ve been breathing on your own okay. The doc said it was just your body's need for sleep. You woke up a couple of times but weren’t really conscious. Said you would wake up when you were ready.” He ran a hand down his face. “I was starting to think you’d never be ready.”

“Sorry.” He apologized again.

Bucky just shook his head, a look of sad amusement displaying across his tired face.

“Have you been here the whole time?”

“When they’d let me. Wouldn’t let me sleep here but the Commandant feels bad enough to let me break curfew a bit. You should have seen the Colonel. I thought we were finally gonna get that mutiny. Made sure you wouldn’t be punished. That there would be no repercussions on the men. Also made sure you’d get all the visitors you needed so you wouldn’t wake up alone. ”

“But I hit you.” Nothing else mattered. Nothing but Bucky.

“And I’d let you do it again if it meant keeping you from taking it out on some lieutenant.”

“Bucky-”

“No, Buck, listen. I get it. Trust me if anyone gets the way this place messes with your head, it’s me. But you can come to me, okay? I need you to come to me and if you want to hash it out with our fists,” He grinned, “a little sparring might be good for us.”

Gale blinked at him, a creeping warmth overtaking the frigid numbness. This wasn’t the heat of fire or anger, this was much better.

“Only if you come to me, ‘k?” His words were slurred. He’d blame the morphine.

“You got a deal, Buck.”

Gale hummed, finding it impossible to keep his eyes open.

A hand ran through his hair and he turned into its warmth. “Go back to sleep Buck, I’ll be here when you wake up.”

“Been ‘sleep three days.” He muttered without moving his lips.

“You need it. And when you wake up we’ll work on gettin’ you caught up on calories, how ‘bout that?”

Maybe Bucky did notice him.

“Hope the snow is gone.” He wasn’t sure why he said it. It wasn’t really about the snow. It was about the cold. And this feeling inside of him. Inside of all of them.

Bucky seemed to understand that. The hand stopped for a moment and he could feel finger intertwine with his hair. “Me too, Buck. Me too.”

Chapter End Notes

All done!
My sweet baby boy <3

Okay, now for my "what's next" ramble.
Originally this was going to be part of a much bigger series. However, the more I planned the series the more I realized I would have to seriously revamp "I Wore The Mask Up High" and I really like the way these two fics have turned out so I'm just going to make a separate series. I will have the first chapter of the first fic up, hopefully within the month? No promises tho lol. If you don't subscribe to me come check back every few weeks or check me out on Tumblr where I will update lol.
The series premise will run from Buck getting shot down and is just me whumping our boy Gale in the stalag <3. I have so many plans it will be fantastic (hopefully lol). It's honestly such a relief to have this fic done so that I can finally focus on that series because I have been wanting to for so long!

I do have at least one other fic in the Masquerade universe. But I think I left this at an okay stopping point!

Would love any feedback or thoughts on this fic! I really did put my everything into and fought through a really crappy headspace to get it out and to a place I'm proud of. Thank you for following along.

Love you all <333

Come say hi on tumblr! I've been updating and teasing more hehe

Much love and God bless,
Jamie

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!